



## NEWS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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### **Folic Acid Stressed to Prevent Birth Defects**

(Salt Lake City, UT) – Recognizing that birth defects affect more than 1,400 babies in Utah each year and are a leading cause of infant death, Governor Michael O. Leavitt has proclaimed January 2003 as Birth Defect Prevention Month. The Utah Department of Health (UDOH) has joined forces with the March of Dimes, University of Utah and other organizations to educate women about what they can do to increase their chances of having a healthy baby.

“While the causes of most birth defects are not known, there are ways women can reduce their risk of having a baby with a birth defect,” says Marcia Feldkamp, UDOH’s Birth Defect Network director. “One important way simply involves taking a multi-vitamin containing folic acid.”

Studies show that taking the B vitamin folic acid before pregnancy decreases the risk of having a pregnancy affected by a neural tube defect (NTD) by at least 50 percent. The two most common NTD’s are spina bifida and anencephaly. NTD’s happen early in pregnancy, 15 to 30 days after conception, before a woman even knows she is pregnant.

The U.S. Public Health Services recommends that all women between 15 and 44 years of age consume 400 micrograms (400mcg or 0.4 mg) of synthetic folic acid each day. Certain breakfast cereals are now fortified with synthetic folic acid, as are enriched grains and pastas. Most over-the-counter multi-vitamins contain the necessary amount of folic acid. Women are also encouraged to eat foods rich in folate, the type of folic acid found in foods, in addition to taking a multivitamin with folic acid every day. Foods rich in folate include green leafy vegetables, orange juice, and beans.

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## **Page 2 of 2 -- Folic Acid Stressed to Prevent Birth Defects**

Women who are planning a pregnancy should begin taking a multi-vitamin with folic acid at least three months before getting pregnant. However, since about half of all pregnancies are unplanned it is important that all women of childbearing years take a multi-vitamin with folic acid every day whether they plan to get pregnant or not.

Despite the importance of folic acid only 14 percent of women in one national study knew that folic acid helps prevent birth defects and 34 percent consumed folic acid daily. Utah women fared much better according to a statewide survey conducted in 2000 that showed 47 percent knew that folic acid helps prevent birth defects and 46 percent consumed folic acid daily. The Utah Folic Acid Council (a multi-agency taskforce) has been providing statewide education to women and health care providers since 1996.

According to Feldkamp there are maternal health conditions, or the medications used to treat specific conditions, that can increase the risk of having a baby with a birth defect. Women who have diabetes, lupus, rheumatoid arthritis, hypertension or other medical conditions should visit with a health care provider before becoming pregnant. Women who take medications for these conditions and who become pregnant, are advised not to stop taking their medications, but to talk with their health care provider as soon as possible.

Utah was recently selected with eight other states to participate in the largest case-control study of birth defects. “This study will dramatically increase our understanding of the causes of birth defects and will provide information for developing effective programs to hopefully prevent other birth defects,” says Feldkamp. The effort is funded by the National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

For more information about birth defects, prevention, the birth defects study, and resources for families, contact the UDOH’s Birth Defect Network at 801-584-8514 or toll-free 1-866-818-7096. For questions about drugs or other exposure during pregnancy, contact Utah’s Pregnancy RiskLine at 801-328-2229 or 1-800-822-2229.

**Note:** Governor Leavitt will sign the proclamation for Birth Defects Month at the State Capitol Building on Friday, January 10 at approximately 2:00 p.m.

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